

# Miracle in Miami



Capt. Mark Jeter and Director Carlos Alvarez of Miami-Dade Police Department

## Three of a Kind

It used to be that most of us working to help the animals and bring an end to the killing of homeless pets were professionals in the humane field – with careers at SPCA's, humane societies, etc.

Today, however, more and more people are getting involved from the world of business, law enforcement and other professional fields, and just plain folks.

Here are the stories of three of them.

### ► By Estelle Munro

"So who will be eligible for this free spay/neuter program?" I asked Capt. Mark Jeter.

"Any resident of Miami-Dade County," the police officer replied.

"Really? No restrictions at all?"

"The only restriction would be that they would have to call up and make an appointment."

"It doesn't have to be a needy person or a dog from the shelter?"

"You can drive up in your Mercedes Benz. We're going to do it because it's the right thing to do."

Capt. Jeter likes the idea of "thinking outside the box." Since he became head of the county's newly named Animal Services Unit on June 26th, shelter adoptions are already way up and the killing rate is way down.

"There's no reason to kill a healthy animal," says Jeter, "and I'm committed to finding ways not to do it. Last year, the shelter took in 22,786 animals and euthanized 17,123 of them. That's terrible."

Since 1982, Miami-Dade County's animal shelter had been run by the Public Works Department, with the police helping in matters relating to animal cruelty and other investigations. But when the previous animal control director took a new position, chief of police Carlos Alvarez talked with the mayor and then with Jeter.

"We sat down and talked about the problems, and then he asked me to head this up, and hopefully I bring a fresh perspective."

Jeter is doing more than that. He's turning the whole depart-

ment inside out. He's already put a whole new emphasis on adoptions and is working to improve medical treatment and conditions for the animals at the 41-year-old compound. That's especially important since dogs and cats will be at the shelter longer, given Jeter's commitment to stop killing healthy, adoptable animals and give them a better chance of adoption.

"I come from a police background so I haven't been inside the box. I just look at things and ask why are we doing this? Wouldn't it make more sense if we did this? 'But nobody has ever done it like that before...' Well, let's try it anyway."

Jeter is focused on finding homes for these homeless pets and providing free spay/neuter countywide to bring down the numbers of unwanted animals being born.

Before he took over, there were only a handful of adoption events a year. Jeter has ordered two to three a month. Since he took over in June, adoptions have doubled from about 15 a day to 30–35 a day. And the shelter population recently hit an all-time low: 273 in a facility that was often over 400.

But the core of the campaign is his free spay/neuter plan, which involves the county shelter, the humane society, veterinarians all over town, big local corporations, and some national foundations.

Miami-Dade County has 2.2 million residents and only about a third of them are renewing their dog licenses. Jeter figures that just by inviting more of them down to the shelter to get their pets



fixed, he'll cover the costs of the free spay/neuter in increased dog licenses and dog tags.

He's also on a fund-raising mission to some of the big corporations that are in the pet supply business. "They've been worried about a possible one-cent sales tax on the pet care industry. So we said: Instead of pushing the tax, let's be good neighbors and do the right thing for the right reason."

So he's asking businesses like Publix, which is a local grocery chain, or Winn Dixie, or Ralston Purina to give out \$10 pet food coupons at the vet as an incentive to get people in to have their animals fixed. And he's talking to foundations to help subsidize the veterinarians who will be participating.

"The benefit to vets," he explains, "is really in the after care and the selling of products. I talked with the president of the South Florida Veterinary Medical Association and we have agreed on a memorandum of understanding. There may be a few vet offices that are not a part of the program. But at some point they are going to have to be. Simply because if you know that 9 out of 10 vet offices are going to provide the service for free, why are you going to pay for it? Right?"

Jeter sees benefits for the humane society, too, in the free spay/neuter initiative. "They're going to be asking for a donation every time. And most people are going to give it to them."

For its part, the humane society calls the program "terrific."

"For every baby born in Miami-Dade County, there are 45 cats and 15 dogs born at exactly the same time," says John Lisk, executive director of the Humane Society of Greater Miami. "This is really not an animal problem; this is a people problem. Until we get responsible and spay and neuter our pets, there's never going to be enough homes for them."

Jeter has set November 1 of this year as the target date for the free spay/neuter program to begin countywide. The county shelter and the humane society may begin offering free spay/neuter earlier.

Meanwhile, the shelter is undergoing renovation, with paint and fans, etc., all donated by the local community. There's better health care for the animals, and lots of blankets and towels to keep them comfortable. While Jeter wants to get them into new homes as quickly as possible, he knows that with his commitment to building a no-kill program, some of the adoptable animals will be at the shelter longer, and he wants their stay to be as happy and carefree as he can make it.

"About six months ago, I adopted a dog from here myself," he says. "That was before I even knew about the position I was going to be taking. His name's Pongo."

The Miami-Dade County shelter web site is at [www.co.miami-dade.fl.us/animals/](http://www.co.miami-dade.fl.us/animals/)

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